



POLICY  
INSIGHTS

PIF **BRIEF**

March 2024

Number 1 | Volume 1

# Enhancing Defence Procurement Communications

By  
Rear-Admiral (Retired)  
Ian Mack



## About the Policy Insights Forum

The Policy Insights Forum (PIF) is a non-partisan Canadian Think Tank focusing on strategic over-the-horizon public policy issues through independent research, analysis and engagement.

To learn more about the PIF, visit [www.policyinsights.ca](http://www.policyinsights.ca).

## Acknowledgments

This publication was written by Rear-Admiral (Retired) Ian Mack. Following his retirement from the Royal Canadian Navy, Rear-Admiral Mack served as Director-General in the Department of National Defence where he oversaw aspects of the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS), along with various shipbuilding and vehicle projects.

## Research Integrity

As a not-for-profit non-governmental organization, the PIF does not adopt or advocate positions on particular matters. The PIF's publications and multimedia productions always represent the views of the author(s) rather than those of the institution. The PIF maintains strict intellectual independence for all of its projects and publications. PIF staff, fellows, volunteers and directors, and those whom the PIF engages to work on specific projects are responsible for generating and communicating intellectual content resulting from PIF projects.

For more information, visit [www.policyinsights.ca/intellectual-independence-policy](http://www.policyinsights.ca/intellectual-independence-policy).

## Disclaimer

This disclaimer governs the use of this publication. By using this publication, you accept this disclaimer in full. The PIF will not be liable for any business losses, including without limitation loss of reputation, damage to profits, income, revenue, use, production, anticipated savings, current or future business, contracts, commercial opportunities or goodwill. This publication may include copyrighted images or material from a third party. You may need to obtain the copyright holder's permission if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material. The PIF's activities are governed by the Laws of Canada.

## Copyright

This publication may include copyrighted images or material from a third party. You may need to obtain the copyright holder's permission if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material. For more information, please visit: [www.policyinsights.ca/copyright-information](http://www.policyinsights.ca/copyright-information).

Copyright 2024 © Policy Insights Forum (PIF). All rights reserved.

© 2024 Policy Insights Forum is a registered trademark.

Cover: Adobe Stock.

## Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This publication and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of PIF's intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Linking directly to its webpage on [policyinsights.ca](http://policyinsights.ca) is encouraged. Permission is required from the PIF to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research products for commercial purposes.

## About the PIF Papers

The PIF Papers publish innovative research in the fields of foreign policy, national defence, international development, and intelligence. This series allows industry representatives, academics, and public officials to share innovative ideas and research across Canada and the world. Featuring both established and emerging thought leaders, the PIF Papers aim to bridge gaps and foster greater understanding across the public and private sectors. All PIF Papers are peer-reviewed and reflect the authors' views alone.

The PIF Papers series published two types of manuscripts: Policy Papers and Policy Briefs.

Policy Papers are in-depth research studies of 7000 words or more.

Policy Briefs are focused analyses and commentaries of 2000-7000 words.

The PIF Papers will be published quarterly, but submissions can be sent at any time. Timely pieces can be published more often and sooner.

English submissions should be sent to Philippe Lagassé: [pl@samuel.associates](mailto:pl@samuel.associates).

French submission should be sent to Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé: [sm@samuel.associates](mailto:sm@samuel.associates).

## À propos des Études IP

Les Études IP publient des travaux de recherche novateurs dans les domaines de la politique étrangère, de la défense nationale, du développement international et du renseignement. Cette série permet aux représentants de l'industrie, aux universitaires et aux fonctionnaires de partager des idées et des recherches au Canada et dans le monde. Présentant à la fois des leaders d'opinion établis et émergents, les Études IP visent à favoriser un meilleur dialogue entre les secteurs public et privé. Toutes les Études sont évaluées par des pairs et ne reflètent que l'opinion de leurs auteur.e.s.

Les Études IP publient deux types de manuscrits : les Analyses politiques et les Notes politiques.

Les Analyses politiques sont des études approfondies de 7000 mots ou plus.

Les Notes politiques sont des commentaires et résumés plus courts et plus ciblés de 2000 à 7000 mots.

Les Études seront publiées tous les trimestres, mais les soumissions peuvent être envoyées à tout moment. Les articles qui correspondent aux événements de l'actualité ou les soumissions régulières peuvent être publiés plus souvent et plus rapidement.

Les soumissions en anglais doivent être envoyées à Philippe Lagassé: [pl@samuel.associates](mailto:pl@samuel.associates).

Les soumissions en français doivent être envoyées à Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé: [sm@samuel.associates](mailto:sm@samuel.associates).

# Table of Contents



About the Policy Insights Forum	I
Acknowledgments	I
Research Integrity	I
Disclaimer	I
Copyright	I
Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights	I
About the PIF Papers	II
À propos des Études IP	II
<b>Background</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>Part of A Deteriorating Media Ecosystem</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Canadian Government Policy on Communications</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Integrity in Communications</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>What Could Be Done</b>	<b>6</b>
Government Support	8
Industry Support	9
Finding the Bandwidth	10
The Spokespersons	11
Protecting Confidences	12
So What	12
Endnotes	13
About Rear-Admiral (Retired) Ian Mack	14

## I. Background

*A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity. – Dalai Lama*

Recently, Philippe Lagassé wrote a piece on the need for more trust of those prosecuting military procurement, while recognizing the troubling challenges to Parliamentarians and the public when things went wrong but identifying transparency as the answer.<sup>1</sup> Having worried about transparency based on my own experience in government, I decided to explore the subject, transparency being defined as ‘the quality of being open to public scrutiny, free from pretense or deceit, readily understood and characterized by accessibility of information’, and further regarding the definition of being open as ‘completely free from concealment, exposed to general view and exposed or vulnerable to attack or question’.

In February 2024, the Standing Committee on National Defence convened four sessions focused on ‘Transparency within the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)’. I immediately thought that this could be a useful entrée for my exploration. As was obvious by observing one such session, the focus was on the assessment of DND and CAF as “chronic offenders of the Access to Information Act’s (ATI) compliance requirements”. Specifically, almost 40% of ATI requests were responded to late and 26% received a ‘no records found’ response. The Honourable James Bezan (the defence critic of the Official Opposition) specifically mentioned four Access to Information (ATI) submissions by him that were very late and which included queries about the Future Fighter Capability Project and the National Shipbuilding Project (NSS). He lamented the fact that Parliamentarians cannot get timely responses, which “doesn’t smell good”.<sup>2</sup>

Such concerns are regularly reported. A recent article referred to another ATI submission requesting information regarding “specific costs and work done on the Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) Project over the past decade”, the response reported as being over two years late and including 1700 pages which identified 19 tasks of the prime contractor but “not a single cost figure” was not redacted.<sup>3</sup>

The CSC project is the most expensive acquisition project of the Federal Government in memory. It was last pegged by the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) at an estimate for 15 warships to have grown to \$77.3B with a 10% range of error – this estimate \$17B over the government announced budget in 2017 of \$55B-\$60B.<sup>4</sup> It appears that the last comment by a government official regarding the CSC project’s cost estimate was in April 2021 following the PBO report, when it was reported that Mr. Troy Crosby (Assistant Deputy Minister for Materiel, DND) expressed confidence in the government budget for the CSC project while admitting concerns for there being the necessary shipyard personnel to deliver as per the plan and for the fallout of the restrictions created by the pandemic which were yet to be fully assessed.<sup>5</sup> Almost three years later, there have been no updates by officials on the latest estimated cost for the CSC project.



The government publishes an annual report on the National Shipbuilding Strategy. While the CSC project is discussed in each of the last three reports (to 2022), one item disappeared after the 2020 report regarding transparency: “Departments will build on extensive communications efforts to provide Canadians with additional information about shipbuilding and the work being advanced under the NSS.”<sup>6</sup>

The common thread that runs through these echoes a frequent concern when discussing major defence acquisitions and especially the NSS and the CSC project – a shortfall in the government’s communications in terms of building trust with stakeholders as billions of taxpayers dollars and important Coast Guard and Navy aspects of the nation’s security are at stake.

More succinctly then, my exploration needed to ask the question why our government is not more transparent, and what might be done about it so as to better inform the public dialogue regarding NSS (a national program to deliver dozens of ships to the government) and CSC in particular (perhaps the most expensive government defence contract ever), and major government acquisition projects more broadly? This paper is the product of my research and reflection.

## **2. Part of a Deteriorating Media Ecosystem**

Communication issues around defence procurement are certainly not unique.

The public narrative regarding governments around the world in responding to the pandemic has demonstrated what can happen to trust when clarity and explanation in a meaningful way are missing as the virus and the related scientific data has evolved.

The lack of trust in democratic governments is particularly of concern. In 2022, the Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report which surveyed 36,000 respondents from 28 countries found what was described as ‘a collapse of trust in democracies’ with less than 50% of respondents saying that they trusted their institutions, in “a world ensnared in a vicious cycle of distrust, fueled by a growing lack of faith in media and government’. Furthermore, 66% of respondents stated that they thought they were being lied to by their government leaders.<sup>7</sup>

Much like the pandemic and the viability of democracies, major defence equipment and services acquisition projects are of strategic importance as one of Canada’s components of national security. When the CSC project could spend north of \$60 billion to provide the future surface combatant to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), this will truly put trust by Canadian taxpayers to the test in terms of the appropriateness of the project – trust that will unavoidably rely on the integrity of communications.

## **3. Canadian Government Policy on Communications**

The importance of effective communications with the Canadian public is recognized in government policy and readily accessible on the Internet.

The Policy on Communications and Federal Identity dated 10 Aug 2019 includes the following relevant requirements:

- Context – Communications are central to the Government of Canada’s work and contribute directly to the Canadian public’s trust in their government.
- Objectives – Government of Canada communications are non-partisan, effectively managed, well coordinated, clear and responsive to the diverse information needs of the public.
- Expected Results – Government communications products and activities are timely, accurate, clear, objective ... and meet the diverse information needs of the public.
- Requirements – Provide timely, clear, objective, factual and non-partisan information ...and responds to information requests or inquiries from the public promptly without undue recourse to the Access to Information Act.

Also noteworthy are the objectives of the Access to Information Act dated 28 June 2023: ‘... strengthened openness and transparency of government’, and ‘strengthening accountability of government to its citizens, and enhanced democratic participation’.

#### 4. Integrity in Communications

The purpose of this paper is not to deliver a treatise on effective communications. The Internet offers a myriad of articles, papers and analyses regarding the ways to communicate so as to foster what today’s neuroscience in some quarters labels as ‘the emotion of trust’ – my preferred Merriam-Webster definition of trust being ‘assured reliance on the truth of someone or something ... which is developed over time through verification’.

Many of such papers speak to the same attributes when describing communicating with integrity – communicating with honesty which builds trust in the relationship with other parties. Scanning just three such papers at random, we see the following behaviours mentioned:<sup>8</sup>

- Being transparent (no hidden/personal agendas).
- Telling the truth – quickly and with empathy when appropriate.
- Knowing what content matters to the other parties and using word pictures and stories for understanding.
- Engaging in continual conversations, even when some are difficult.
- Real relationships demonstrating sincere respect for and interest in others and their opinions (with active listening and welcoming questions) – such relationships best achieved face-to- face and preferably one-on-one to capitalize on what recent research argues is the importance of eye contact to trust.
- Taking responsibility for the truth which can call for vulnerability instead of defensiveness when errors are made.
- Well intentioned (speaking in good faith) and well focused.
- Showing up 100% of the time when it matters to others.

One other recent paper highlights the successful attributes of communication in Taiwan to essentially defeat the spread of COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> The paper addresses many key communications attributes employed by the government enabled by significant institutional capacity and funding: a single voice, transparency, debunking rumours, easily available high quality communications materials, the encouragement of questions that were answered in multiple mediums and the avoidance of stigmatization. While the culture of the audience in Taiwan is different from that in Canada, the island's government apparently achieved a very high level of trust, which alongside other actions enabled Taiwan to minimize the impacts of the pandemic.

Considering such concepts, the following approaches to communication are therefore best excluded because they can harm credibility and therefore trust:

- Remaining silent when issues emerge.
- Keeping secrets other than those that must be protected for legitimate reasons such as privacy and national security.
- Not explaining the 'why's'.
- Employing 'spin' (the biased manipulation of a message to support one's position and which can imply deception).
- Resorting solely to Press Releases.
- Being selective in terms of which parts of the ongoing public narrative to respond to.
- Faulting other agencies in their communications (method or content).
- Failing to educate.
- Failing to communicate so that it is meaningful.

In my decade as a Director-General within the Defence Department attempting to progress major weapons system platform acquisition projects for the Canadian Army and the RCN (including NSS and CSC), I was repeatedly disappointed by the infrequency and quality of many of the external communication events regarding my portfolio of projects.

Let me say very clearly that I never observed outright lies in the external communications that occurred. Nevertheless on those occasions when project issues arose for a plethora of reasons, the reality was that these were rarely communicated to the public at all, and then poorly communicated. In hindsight, it would be hard to see how the government policy on communicating with the public was satisfied. Avoidance seemed to be the overriding principle when major weapon system platform projects costing between one and multiple billions of dollars were experiencing challenges in meeting their advertised target outcome.

It was not surprising that these shortfalls in meaningful information were replaced with media messages based on 'unidentified sources', rumours and biased opinions. Yet there was a story behind every one of these embarrassing PR issues, about ethical and well-meaning actors doing their best in difficult circumstances and coming up short – stories that could have filled the void with the reasons why challenges had occurred. Had this occurred, I believe there would have been fewer one-sided media reports that exacerbated the 'military procurement is broken' narrative.

## 5. What Could Be Done

Before turning to ways of improving on Canada's defence procurement communication legacy, it is useful to set out my biases and assumptions:



- Canadians are somewhat disinterested in messages regarding government programs and international challenges that are not perceived to impact them personally, including matters of defence.
- Defence is always an important component part of our national security apparatus, and especially in an interconnected and deteriorating global security environment.
- Defence procurement is overhead of the CAF, time consuming, expensive and complex – complexity rendering it on a spectrum between moderately and highly risky.
- Freedom of speech matters, to state one of the obvious values of our democracy.
- Timely and meaningful communications with integrity is expected by the public and external opinion makers on strategic and often dynamic matters.
- There are few secrets for long.
- There seems to be an ever-reducing number of Canadian media journalists interested in (e.g. paid to follow) defence matters.
- In the competition for bandwidth in the continuous flow of live streams of news, attention is often captured with inflammatory headlines and one-sided perspectives.
- I support Simon Sinek's focus on the 'why' over the 'what' and the 'how' when communicating with purpose.
- In Canada and as with other western democracies, the paucity of meaningful communications of what will be perceived as 'bad news' is a symptom of what risk expert organizations would likely assess as an unhealthy risk culture.

I have written before on this subject in 2019 based on my own experience. <sup>10</sup> The paper spoke to cases when transparency and trust were developed for some period of time:

- I explained such things as an initiative established by Vice-Admiral Greg Maddison (then Commander of Maritime Command) which focused on providing our Navy's perspective on daily emergent naval issues and naval plans for the near term horizon to Opinion Makers of Naval Interests – hence the initiative's name, OMNI.
- I recounted my experience with a weekly unclassified and internal email entitled "This Week in Ottawa", which was meant for the Formation Commanders but was soon widely distributed across Maritime Command and beyond. These were unclassified but never referred to in the media over the two years I was in that position.
- I drew on my time in Washington DC as Canada's Defence Attaché to the USA in terms of two approaches: the creation of the website 'Canadian Ally.Com', and my frequent responses to urgent questions from the late Henry Champ regarding his imminent brief journalistic broadcasts from Washington when they addressed defence matters.
- The paper also addressed the cross-Canada approach employed to announce equipment projects of the Canada First Defence Strategy which included pre-briefs to journalists.
- I referred to the very successful activity conducted by then Director-General André Fillion in the early stages of the Next Generation Fighter Project, an educational tour across Canada which dispelled confusion and myths very effectively after the project had been announced.

Another example of what can be done in communicating with Canadian media occurred in 2017 during a brief by a government official on the way forward for the CSC Bid Evaluation. <sup>11</sup> I believe that it was available to the public as well as those attending. In my view it was clear, comprehensive, informative and truthful – the latter based on my involvement in developing the approach in the two previous years. There is also a CGAI paper that addresses the subject of fixing strategic communications at DND that offers pragmatic actions that can be taken and is worthy of review by interested readers. <sup>12</sup>

I have taken a different approach in this paper. I have considered the primary barriers to improved communications by the government, and potential responses to the common and often valid ‘yes but’ concerns. In doing so I have been guided by considering one of the most problematic of topics - naval programs/projects (e.g. NSS, Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships or AOPS, CSC and the Joint Support Ships or JSS), with an RCN that normally operates far away from Canada’s shores and its citizens. The five common barriers include the following:

- How could the government be convinced to support enhanced transparency with so much uncertainty at play in complex weapon system platform acquisitions and the resulting concerns for being perceived as vulnerable?
- How could companies delivering against procurement contracts be convinced to support enhanced transparency?
- How could better communications on military procurement risks and issues capture bandwidth with a somewhat disinterested Canadian public?
- How could a spokesperson enable stakeholders to relate in a meaningful way to NSS and CSC, including the explanation of the complex aspects?
- How could this initiative respect legitimate government and commercial confidences?

With the foregoing as a backdrop I could see what follows in this paper as the elements of a more engaging communications strategy, recognizing that perfect communications would often be unachievable – but hopefully less imperfect as measured by observing fewer occasions of communications failures than in the past.

## Government Support

It is not uncommon for governments to be broadly risk averse, whether they are democracies or authoritarian in nature. In Public Affairs communications, this can play out by restricting the government’s narrative to positive aspects of stories or by remaining silent. In a parliamentary democracy where Ministers are responsible for all activities in their portfolios, the communications gatekeepers often attempt to depoliticize emerging issues with ‘spin’. So the question becomes, why would they support enhanced transparency aside from an altruistic interest in the public’s trust?

Perhaps the best evidence is captured in one of the articles referred to earlier which implied that a cabal of officials were possibly involved in a cover-up regarding reality in two projects under the Combat Package of the NSS – the AOPS and CSC projects. <sup>13</sup> As evidence, this article referred to an email sent by yours truly back in 2013 which could be perceived from the article as possibly malicious in intent. It was actually meant to alert colleagues

and avoid surprise regarding a potentially imminent media story – something I did regularly and especially with Central Agency contacts. The potential damage to project credibility and trust was apparent to anyone reading the document, but I believe the government never communicated to set the record straight. In fact, I was not even aware of this article until preparing this paper. One would think that such articles would impact the public narrative and would trigger a strong impetus within government to develop a meaningful response. Silence could be interpreted to support a theory of conspiracy involving the government and a contractor. I suspect that there was also a judgment rendered that a non-response would ensure the story died and did not ‘grow legs’ – which with the benefit of hindsight was probably a sound strategy.

More broadly I believe that greater openness would be embraced as a way of putting an end to the greater risk of long-term damage to the public’s trust, something which seems to be the case today relating to major defence procurement projects. And while what follows may be clichés, there is much in the following quotations that should sway the communications approach away from a preference for silence:

Success is not final, failure is not fatal – *Winston Churchill*

There is no bad news, there are only blessings in disguise – *James Hervey*

There is no bad news, there is only news – *Anonymous*

Continuing support will depend entirely on how this initiative rolls out in developing trust within the defence industry, the government and the public.

One final qualifying comment is critical. Unless successive governments embrace such an initiative, the ruling parties or the Opposition could feel compelled to delay or promise to cancel well advanced defence acquisition projects respectively. Many will remember when Jean Chrétien promised in the 1993 election to cancel the Maritime Helicopter contract put in place by the former Conservative government, which he did within hours of being elected – an action which delayed a replacement helicopter for a decade. In essence, a biased or polarized public narrative risks leaving the CAF without assured continuity of essential and modern capabilities required to contribute to collective security.

## Industry Support

Once in contract, the executing industry team routinely objects to their confidential information being released. This was raised as a salient point by Defence Minister Blair in testimony to a recent session of the Standing Committee on National Defence investigating DND’s transparency shortfalls.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, industry is reluctant to divulge information that could harm their intellectual property, reputation and/or share price. Many hours of haggling lawyers are expended defining whether an announcement could harm a company’s reputation, with no regard within industry for the potential harm to the government’s credibility of making no announcements or responses to media reports.

But defence procurement is about taxpayer’s money in exchange for strategic security capabilities, and

accountability of the government to the people of Canada. Furthermore what is good for government is good for involved contractors – and vice versa; if military procurement has a black eye, so too do the defence industry suppliers involved.

Companies choosing to compete for such procurements need to understand that supporting communications with integrity should be a standard and mandatory obligation. Employing Terms and Conditions precedent to contract award – and as grounds for breach of contract if not complied with – could address this matter. As well, the use of structured and binding collaborative protocols for joint decision-making (an emerging best practice for complex projects) could facilitate such a more transparent PR approach. To address existing contracts such as those under NSS like the CSC project, new or amended contracts could include such covenants. And as with government support, the methodology employed publicly to speak to contractor challenges will be key to building and maintaining trust.

## Finding the Bandwidth

From my assumption set, there is cause for concern regarding the ability to reach and engage the Canadian public (setting aside retired veterans like me, scholars and a handful of journalists that follow defence matters) because Canadians appear to have little interest in matters of defence in general.

Observers lament what communications do occur as not employing content that Canadians can relate to. As a panelist in a communications webinar hosted in 2022 by CGAI pointed out regarding NSS, it is still communicated by Canada as a procurement process story which attracts little public attention. Instead it was suggested that it should be a shipbuilding rebirth story about Canada's marine industry and its professionals, along with the 'why' well explained in terms of providing the men and women of the RCN with effective ships to conduct future missions to deter potential harm in a world of increasing threats to our security.

As required by the government policies mentioned earlier, government officials have a duty to provide communications that are timely, accurate, clear, objective and meet the diverse information needs of the public. If current communications are not engaging the public's interest, clearly the government is not meeting the diverse information needs of the public.

The key is to provide the opinion makers who shape the media narratives with the meaningful 'big picture' explanations about project challenges, alongside the related human interest stories of those involved that citizens are more likely to listen to. The journalists, scholars and business analysts who publish routinely complain about being starved for information about NSS and the related shipbuilding projects, with no indication of the government's briefing plans to rely on for their next report. The needs of the external experts should be seen as important to the success of NSS specifically and military platform acquisitions more generally. And if the interested influencers have useful information, they will hopefully find ways to speak to the interested public because their livelihood depends on it. Without regular updates, we are assured of the problematic status quo.

## The Spokespersons

Ground truth is important when briefing the public, so the responsible leaders at the NSS portfolio and shipbuilding project levels should adopt what I would call 'Plan A' – the provision of regular briefs, supplemented with timely responses whenever media stories emerge. Plan A briefs would employ the majority of the attributes of communicating with integrity, while avoiding the typical shortfalls in communications. In time enhanced trust could be achieved, using a simple briefing formula: tell them what you know (and why), tell them what you do not know (and what you are doing about the unknowns or uncertainties), and tell them when you will brief again.

As motivation to become more transparent, I would offer a 'Plan B' – the employment of a funded arms length agency as the military procurement spokespersons. It could be created through legislation to ensure objectivity through independence and perhaps funded through the Library of Parliament as is the case with the PBO. Such an agency would supplement the messaging of government Ministers and officials as appropriate to assure an informed public narrative. The independence and legislated mandate would be important to leverage support from the core departments involved in defence procurement – National Defence, Public Services and Procurement Canada, and Innovation Science and Economic Development Canada.

Such an agency could also speak to OAG and PBO Reports. Specifically such an agent could highlight the ongoing work in NSS to implement the OAG's recommendations in their last audit. In terms of PBO reports, the 'margin of error' of the models employed by that office to generate their cost estimates could be highlighted as typical of such models, along with explaining the details and rationale for DND's approach to the current estimates, the plan to next update cost estimates and the significant work of doing so.

Critical to its success, the agency would need to adopt a 'servant leadership' model towards all stakeholders while being consistent in their approach, fair, ethical and comfortable admitting to vulnerability when there is doubt or error. The agency would also have to avoid the reality and perception of any conflict of interest. Regular briefings to opinion makers should be relatively frequent (perhaps every three-to-six months) and in person as much as possible, with taped on-line access to all sessions soon after each is completed. And to the extent that time allows, in-person briefs with smaller groups of opinion makers could also be pursued – groups over individuals to safeguard against misrepresentations.

Within this agency, there would need to be experienced personnel with current sector-specific knowledge of all defence procurement projects (Air, Space, Land, Maritime and Digital). By contracting with companies providing media tracking and reporting, the agency would have access to all elements of the public narrative regarding subjects on defence procurement such as NSS and CSC. As well, this body should have as much unfettered and timely access as possible to all parties in government and the private sector involved in significant defence procurement programs and acquisition projects, to ensure their briefs are timely and truthful while recognizing and protecting legitimate confidences. Spokespersons should be comfortable executing the best communications practices identified earlier, exhibiting exceptional emotional intelligence and being fluent in both Official Languages.

Spokespersons would deliver balanced information, would always respond to the public narrative in a meaningful way and would regularly educate/explain in ways which would work to address uncertainties and contradictions. The agency would also respond to and call out inflammatory headlines, opinions masquerading as facts and exaggerations. And by showing up 100% of the time in this manner, relationships would develop built on the sort of trust enjoyed in the '60s and '70s in the USA by Walter Cronkite and later in Canada by Peter Mansbridge.

## Protecting Confidences

Clearly Cabinet and actual commercial confidences could not be divulged. However decisions taken in government usually can be explained without attribution or detail such that the public can understand ‘why’ things are happening. Similarly companies should accept that their challenges which put Canada at risk should be public knowledge of importance – fairly explained along with the planned remedial action plan status/content divulged. In my own experience when dealing with such matters, I have usually found ways to respond to queries with explanations that were valued and without divulging confidences, by explaining the generalities relating to the rationale for decisions taken, and challenges being confronted without attributing blame.

## 6. So What

Living in a democracy, I have perhaps naively wondered why governments are not more focused on building trust with their citizens. I have wondered why the OAG does not comment on the effectiveness of communications with a regular government-wide audit (perhaps every five years) and/or as an aspect of every audit undertaken. Certainly they have a policy basis for auditing the government’s transparency. And based on the level of complaints about the quality, completeness and timeliness of communications the public is interested in, it would seem to be a justified OAG pursuit, and one which could result in improvement over time.

In terms of NSS and the CSC project specifically and defence acquisitions more broadly, we must also accept that the acquisition of weapons systems platforms is complex and difficult work for all nations. Recently a RAND report was provided at the request of the UK government (National Audit Office, I think) entitled ‘Persistent Challenges in UK Defence Equipment Acquisition’.<sup>15</sup> The short paper identifies many of the challenges also faced in renewing the RCN and the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) fleets.

In the context of military procurement challenges, it is even more important to better communicate with the broad public about the NSS and the CSC project because of their cost and importance to the RCN and the CCG. My sense is that the government can communicate with greater levels of what is defined in this paper as ‘integrity’ and with much greater frequency. As one astute observer opined during the 2022 CGAI podcast on defence procurement communications, it does not matter what messages are being generated if there is a lack of trust in the spokesperson.

With so much at stake, is it not time to embrace greater transparency where it is questionable and implement the government’s own policies on the subject? If not Plans A or B, I would hope that we will see an effective Plan C, because we surely should not leave defence security at risk with what many perceive as is the case with the status quo.



## Endnotes

- 1 Philippe Lagassé, Cultural Factors in Defence Procurement Reform: Trust, Trouble and Transparency, Debating Canadian Defence, 10 February 2024
- 2 Meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence, 12 February, 2024
- 3 David Pugliesi, Unprecedented Level of Secrecy Surrounds Costs and Work on \$80B Warship Project, Ottawa Citizen, 24 January 2024
- 4 Parliamentary Budget Office, The Cost of Canada's Surface Combatants: 2021 Update and Options Analysis, 24 February 2021
- 5 Lee Berthiaume, No Plans to Change Warships Despite PBO Cost Warning, top official says, the Canadian Press, April 4, 2021
- 6 Canada's National Shipbuilding Strategy: 2020 Annual Report, 3 Jun 2021
- 7 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Report
- 8 Chen Rainey, 10 Ways To Build Trust Through Communication, 850 Business Magazine, Apr 2013; Shelley Baur, What is Integrity-Based Communications (IBC), LinkedIn, Nov 2014; and David Weitzner, After a year of Zoom meetings, we'll need to rebuild trust through eye contact, York University Research in The Conversation, 9 May 2021
- 9 Heidi Tworek, Taiwan's COVID-19 and Pandemic Experience: What are the Lessons for Canada, CGAI, Apr 2021
- 10 Ian Mack, Transparency in Military Procurement – It's Not Rocket Science, Naval Association of Canada, Niobe Papers, No. 3 – June 2019
- 11 Procurement Brief, Speaking notes for National Shipbuilding Strategy Technical Briefing on Canadian Surface Combatant Request for Proposal, Ottawa, November 27, 2017
- 12 Brett Boudreau, Fixing Strategic Communications at National Defence Demands a Whole-of-Government Effort, CGAI, June 2022
- 13 David Pugliesi, 'Too much noise' on Canadian warship program - DND Deputy Minister admonishes industry executives, Chronicle Herald/Ottawa Citizen, 14 Dec 2020
- 14 Meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence, 12 February, 2024
- 15 Lucia Retter, Julia Muravska, Ben Williams, James Black, RAND Report, Persistent Challenges in UK Defence Equipment Acquisition, 2021

## About Rear-Admiral (Retired) Ian Mack

After retiring from the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) as a Rear-Admiral, Ian served for a decade (2007-2017) as a Director-General in the Department of National Defence, responsible for aspects of the launch of the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS), and for guiding DND project managers for three RCN shipbuilding projects and four vehicle projects for the Canadian Army. Since leaving government, he has offered shipbuilding and project management perspectives in many papers and in person. Ian is a Fellow of the International Centre for Complex Project Management, of the World Commercial and Contracting Association and of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He also is an Executive Associate of Strategic Relationships Solutions Inc.



POLICY  
INSIGHTS

POLICY INSIGHTS FORUM  
350 Sparks Street, Suite 901  
Ottawa, Ontario K1R 7S8  
Main: (613) 292-3936  
[info@policyinsights.ca](mailto:info@policyinsights.ca)

[policyinsights.ca](http://policyinsights.ca)